Adolescent mass shootings: developmental considerations in light of the Sandy Hook shooting.

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Abstract
Adolescent mass shootings are a special subset of mass killings, which continue despite significant preventative public health efforts. It is often held that these individuals have few salient warning signs that could have been identified. This piece proposes that mass shootings committed by adolescent and post-adolescent young males must be understood from a developmental perspective. The hypothesis proposed in this paper is that such killings occur as the result of the adolescent's frustrated effort to progress along normative development. The goal of normative separation from maternal figures by the boy is presented as a potential risk factor when this goal is thwarted. Childhood case material from the perpetrator of a recent adolescent mass shooting, the Sandy Hook shooting, is discussed as an illustration of this hypothesis. Implications for public health measures and for individualized treatment are presented and developed.

Keywords: Adolescents, separation from mother, forensic evaluation, mass shootings, firearms, preventative services

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Introduction
There have been a series of mass shootings committed by adolescents over the recent decades. These mass shootings grab the public's attention. They stand in contrast to the many more frequent and possibly more significant in terms of numbers of victims of on-going gang killings in poor areas such as those in Chicago which, in contrast, seem to occur within a social matrix, however dysfunctional that society may be.

The adolescent mass shooting to be described in this paper are usually perpetrated by single male individuals, many of which are Caucasians, who often have been loners and may or may not have attracted attention as dysfunctional individuals (1,2). Preliminary observations have noted that those who commit matricide in the course of such shootings often have a symbiotic relationship with their mother (3). On many occasions, these adolescent mass shootings have been preceded by matricide, despite matricide being an exceptionally rare event (4). In recent history, these have included the Pearl High School shooting in Pearl, Mississippi (1997), the Thurston High School shooting in Springfield, Oregon (1998), and the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in Sandy Hook, Connecticut (2012).

Aim of this review
- Outline in broad strokes the developmental tasks of adolescence in contemporary American society
• Study the public documents describing the developmental trajectories and familial constellations of one perpetrator of a recent mass shooting incident, and
• Compare the public data about this young man to the normative developmental tasks of adolescence as a means of better understanding warning signs and providing more targeted preventative efforts.

**Hypothesis**
These mass killers have had a dysfunctional adolescence which consists of an entangled relationship with their mothers: either feeling engulfed or feeling sexually overstimulated and an absent father (5), who does not help them move away from mother. If this hypothesis bares fruit, it could lead to public health changes: when one treats or observes a troubled teen, one has to promote a relationship with a father or father surrogate to help the teen further his psychological development.

**Review of the literature**
A review of the literature concerning the normative developmental tasks of the adolescents begins with Anna Freud. In her paper titled Adolescence, Anna Freud wrote:

“I take it that it is normal for an adolescent to behave for a considerable length of time in an inconsistent and unpredictable manner; to fight his impulses and to accept them; to ward them off successfully and to be overrun by them; to love his parents and to hate them; to revolt against them and to be dependent on them; to be deeply ashamed to acknowledge his mother before others and, unexpectedly, to desire heart-to-heart talks with her; to thrive on imitation of and identification with others while searching unceasingly for his own identity; to be more idealistic, artistic, generous, and unselfish than he will ever be again, but also the opposite: self-centered, egoistic, calculating. Such fluctuations between extreme opposites would be deemed highly abnormal at any other time of life. At this time they may signify no more than that an adult structure of personality takes a long time to emerge, that the ego of the individual in question does not cease to experiment and is in no hurry to close down on possibilities. If the temporary solutions seem abnormal to the onlooker, they are less so, nevertheless, than the hasty decisions made in other cases for one-sided suppression, or revolt, or flight, or withdrawal, or regression, or asceticism, which are responsible for the truly pathological developments described above.

While an adolescent remains inconsistent and unpredictable in his behavior, he may suffer, but he does not seem to me to be in need of treatment. I think that he should be given time and scope to work out his own solution. Rather, it may be his parents who need help and guidance so as to be able to bear with him. There are few situations in life which are more difficult to cope with than an adolescent son or daughter during the attempt to liberate themselves” [6].

We can learn from this writing that adolescence is, at heart, a contradiction, or paradox. The adolescent may at times be unbelievably egotistic and at other times be the most self-sacrificing person in the world; he or she may submit blindly to a leader or may stubbornly defy all authority; be selfishly
materialistic or express the most lofty idealism; be ascetic or at other times be wildly self-indulgent; be inconsiderate or very touching, optimistic or pessimistic, enthusiastic or sluggish and apathetic. They may be very uncompromising and refuse to make concessions to the adult world, and they may reveal the most intense kinds of ideas about the world around them (7).

Everyone who has seen a young adolescent clearly sees the evidence of the hormones at work: the size, the strength, the changes in hair distribution, the development of the genital organs, the overall physical development. These changes in the bodies of both boys and girls lead to a variety of psychological changes. Additionally, there are physical changes in the brain activity (8). Relevant to our current study, these biological effects of testosterone are hypothesized to elevate both suicide (9–11) and homicide (12) risk.

Why are adolescents so stormy and violence-prone like this? The short answer to that question is that they act in such contradictory ways because:

- They need to psychologically cope with their increased awareness of their bodies, the physical changes that are occurring, and their increasing desires, and
- They have to shift their focus of attachments from their parents, as the only people who really matter, to developing attachments to and relationships with other people as important.

Adolescents who find themselves unable to accomplish these two primary developmental feats are at risk. A conflicted maternal relationship within these young men as children can prevent obtaining the second goal.

The material presented below comes from an interview with the adolescent shooter’s father (13) and corroborating evidence in the form of a police report of childhood material (14). Caution should be applied when drawing any conclusions from this approach. Whereas the psychological autopsy remains a mainstay of investigations of completed suicides (15), the interview was conducted by a non-professional, and the police report does not contain the full primary material. There are also inherent limitations to the psychological autopsy, of which the methodology of this application falls into the first generation of such studies as there is no case-control design. With these limitations in mind we present the below.

Adam Lanza: Family constellation and childhood history

Adam Lanza was born in 1992 to a family of a mother, father, and older brother. Adam demonstrated developmental delays and did not develop speech until the age of three. There were also sensory hypersensitivity difficulties. Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) symptoms, including cleaning compulsions, were present. Speech and occupational therapy were put in place through kindergarten and first grade.

Ryan’s mother became a stay-at-home mom and is described by his father as providing “coaching” to address his “strugg[l]es with basic emotions.” Adam was described as “practicing facial expressions in the mirror” and had thought “everyone else in the world deserved more than he did.” Growing up Adam’s father spent long hours at work while the mother would parent the children; roles were reversed on the weekends, when the father would frequently take the children on outings while the mother ran errands. Adam’s father described his own father as having relatively disengaged from his wife and family and buried himself in work, and his interviewer notes that he didn’t
have a strong model for family life. When Adam was nine his parents separated.

Shortly thereafter, in the fifth grade, Adam produced a bound spiral documented titled “The big book of granny.” It is from this document that we will explore the theme of frustrated separation from the mother and the attendant violent anger and rage in his writings. Whereas Adam’s father in the interview material described him as simply a “normal weird kid,” offering that he had a sharp sense of humor and that “he wanted to use his savings to buy toys for needy children,” elements of Adam’s rage was noticed up by his contemporaries. Adam “got into trouble” for attempting to sell the below at school, and Adam’s teachers eventually “noted ‘disturbing’ violence in his writing.” His defenses may have been adaptive in certain contexts, including the use of reaction formation in his sharing of his wish to help needy children with his parents, but maladaptive in others, including the “trouble” he attracted in the educational setting through his use of displacement and attempts at sublimation in the below material. The below is presented to demonstrate the frustrated mother-son separation theme.

**Case material: The “Book of granny”**

The “Book of granny” begins with a list of 85 “granny jokes”, all of which the report describes as degrading and beginning with “Granny…”. A list of “granny products of the future,” mainly including action figurines, then follows.

In the first section, a fictitious TV show titled “Granny’s clubhouse of happy children” is presented with three episodes. In the first episode, granny “punches one boy in the face, throws a match and causes an explosion, and threatens to shoot and kill the children.” In the second episode, one character asks “Remember last time when everyone was slaughtered!? Well, you bread-brain leeches gave me 75 years for that so called ‘tragedy!’ I was having fun!” In the last episode, a game of “hide and go die” is presented.

Already, there is a theme presented of intense violence and anger directed towards a maternal figure underneath the banner of a “clubhouse of happy children.” We may guess that the manifest choice to describe a grandmother in lieu of a mother is a typical displacement used by children when they play games or create stories. From the materials present, it is unknown what type of relation, if any, that Adam may have had towards a grandparent.

In the second chapter, “Adventures of granny,” eight chapters are produced in which various violent episodes occur. In the first chapter, granny’s cane is revealed to be a gun. Granny and her son first rob a bank together and Granny shoots people with her rifle cane, ultimately blowing up the bank with dynamite. Following the robbery, the son shoots Granny in the head with a shotgun. This first chapter anticipates the bond of inter-personal violence in the son-mother dyad. It appears to presage the author’s ultimate act of matricide (1, page 13). If this inference is correct, that the granny figure is a displacement from mother, it is significant that the theme of matricide was present in Adam's psyche, albeit as a fantasy, as the only way out of a violently close and overbearing relationship. These violent themes, some thinly veiled by closeness, are repeated in various iterations in the following chapters in the granny book. "Mother" (as represented by granny) and son are bonded to one another in a seeming orgy of violence.

In the second chapter, granny and her son go on a boat ride. When granny falls out of the boat, the son throws her a cement flotation device whereupon she drowns at the bottom of the ocean. Yet, in the subsequent
chapters, granny survives and granny and son are involved in one homicidal act after another, ending with both of them receiving 75 years in jail.

In the third chapter, granny and her son attempt to “capture a boy and stuff him, to put on the mantle.” Granny kicks the boy into the fireplace and he begins to burn. The boy jumps out of the fire to punch granny in the face when she shoots at him with her rifle cane. She throws one of the aforementioned “action figures” at the boy who, distracted as the action figure comes to life, is shot by the action figure. Granny’s son shouts “Yay! Now we can hang it!”

In chapter four, granny and her son go to a hockey game where granny goes onto the ice, punches a player in the face, shoots him with her rifle cane, and leaves with her son to have dinner in a restaurant. In chapter five, a character named Dora is introduced who meets granny when she enrolls at a marine boot camp. Granny asks Dora if she would assassinate a soldier at midnight, to which she agrees and says, “I like hurting people…especially children…”. Granny “then shoots multiple people with her rifle cane.” Granny leaves boot camp to return to her son to whom she announces that she killed the whole boot camp.

In chapter six, Dora picks up granny and her son on the side of the road and tells them that she can take them to wherever they would like to go. They choose a daycare center. On arrival Dora again reveals her wish and says, “Let’s hurt children.”

In chapter seven, granny and her son go to visit Dora. In their adventure to find a character named “Drunk” they open a bag to reveal a variety of firearms, including an AK-47, M-16, rifle, rocket launcher, musket, and a shotgun. Dora shoots five characters with the shotgun and gets arrested for possession of the guns and murdering the characters. In the final chapter, granny and her son use a time machine to go back in time, meet the Beatles, and kill them. They both get arrested and sentenced to 75 years in jail for killing them.

Discussion
We can see in this case material that from a very early age, the fantasy life of a young man was suffused with violence, violence in which he and a mother substitute were intricately and intimately involved. One can conjecture that the child experienced frustrated efforts to separate from the mother as illustrated in chapter two, where there is an unsuccessful effort to kill off granny. While psychological autopsy of multiple school shootings would be illuminative, the above case is presented for hypothesis generation: whether this kind of mother-son constellation, one suffused with violence and inability to separate, is generative for future mass violence.

Only in select cases will such frustrated efforts lead to mass shooting. Several factors may have contributed to the outcome leading to the Sandy Hook shooting. For one, the relationship of Adam’s father with his son was described as detached. A poor model of paternal closeness was described in Adam’s father’s own father, and there does appear to be an inter-generational pattern at play. Secondly, for reasons not clear with the current availability of data, Adam’s mother chose firearms as a medium for connection with her son. His access to firearms and the psychological importance of these weapons, likely played a great role. Their appearance in his psychological creations and their ultimate exhibition in his act of violence (Adam carried multiple firearms on his person in the shooting) is at the heart of the matter. Suicide rates increase
dramatically when guns are kept in the home (16). This has led to calls for reform in public policy regarding firearms (17).

Psychiatric disorders are additionally well-known risk factors for suicidal and homicidal behavior (18), and it is clear from the case material that Adam displayed symptoms of several disorders even in his childhood. Adam’s compulsions may be seen both as defenses against his rage at developmental blockades as well as indicators of disorder amenable to biological therapies. A model which combines the studies of biological psychiatry and conflicts may be of best help.

**Implications for treatment**

Young adolescents presenting with such violent fantasy material deserve treatment. With treatment violent occurrences in real life may be prevented. An essential aspect of such treatment is to form a substitute paternal relationship with the child allowing these fantasies to remain as modified fantasies without retorting to action in real life. A child with vivid violent fantasies can believe that such fantasies can become real. The relationship with a father or father surrogate can protect the child from his imagined dangerous fantasies as well as assist the child to separate from the mother in a non-destructive, non-homicidal, non-suicidal way.

**Implications for public health**

Current preventative measures only do half the work. The removal of guns from the home, consistently found to be among the most effective preventative efforts of the public health field (17), simply does not do enough to prevent adolescent youth homicide. Integrated into these efforts should be the targeted treatments of adolescence demonstrating significant difficulties in attaining normative developmental goals. Combined with firearm removal, this preventative work may go a long way in preventing future adolescent mass shootings.

**Further studies**

Further studies are needed to evaluate the accuracy of the hypothesis proposed in this paper and to ascertain whether one can identify the specific individual factors which allow violent fantasies in troubled adolescents and post-adolescents to become violent actions in their real lives.

**References**